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Abstract

This research explored the hypothesis that the rich and varied experience that black youth typically have with figurative language outside of school would enhance their understanding of figurative language in school texts. Path analysis confirmed that for black students "sounding" skill, as well as general verbal ability, has a direct influence on figurative language comprehension. Black language ability influences figurative language comprehension indirectly through its effect on sounding skill. For white students, only general verbal ability affects figurative language comprehension.

Reading Comprehension and Creativity in Black Language Use:

You Stand to Gain by Playing the Sounding Game!

Jesse: Man, you so ugly that when you walk down the streets the dogs die!

Duane: Well, man, you so ugly that when you walk down the streets blind folks turn their heads!

Jesse: Well, you so ugly that when you were born the doctor slapped your face!

Duane: Well, you so ugly that when you were born the doctor slapped your momma!

Jesse: Well at least my momma don't look like she snorted a basketball!

A variety of terms describe this type of black verbal play: "playin' the dozens," "sounding," "cappin'," "smashin'," and so on. All are labels for what Labov (1972) calls "ritual insult." Insults play a role in several forms in Black Language, that is nothing new. But the possibility of capitalizing on the skills upon which these forms rely for an educational purpose is a new idea.

It has been more than a decade since the debate raged over whether ethnic dialects of English, such as Black English, permit abstract or higher order reasoning in the same measure as Standard English. In fact, one can view the efforts of social scientists of the seventies (e.g., Fasold, 1972; Labov, 1970; Dillard, 1973; Stewart, 1970) as attempts to establish Black English as a fully developed linguistic system, with a predictable pattern of syntax and phonology, on a par with Standard English. The old deficit arguments about Black English (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) seem to have faded away.

However, even the theory that Black English is different, not deficient, does not lead one to suppose that it is ever an advantage in school. In this study, we asked what positive benefits to school learning might accrue from competence in Black English. In other words, what can Black English do for the black child that Standard English cannot do for either the black or the white child?

Taking a cue from Taylor and Ortony's (1980) observation that various forms of ritual insult found in Black English involve metaphorical comparisons, we decided to find out if the strategies used in these verbal encounters helped black students understand the kind of figurative language they encounter in educational settings.

Opinions differ as to the role of figurative language, specifically metaphor, in language comprehension. We agree with Petrie (1979) who argues that metaphor serves a bridging function by enabling the reader to move from the known to the unknown; and with Ortony (1975) who believes that the function of metaphor is threefold: it "compacts" information, it expresses the otherwise inexpressible, and it makes communication more "vivid." Some experimental evidence to support the hypothesis that metaphors enhance comprehension is reported by Pearson, Raphael, Tepaske, and Hyser (1981). They found that when passage material was unfamiliar, metaphors had a facilitative effect on recall.

Black Language Patterns

In the black community a great deal of emphasis is placed on verbal skill. Oftentimes it is not so much what you say but how you say it. In

this section we will discuss seven verbal forms in Black English which rely heavily on nonliteral devices: idioms, the rhetorical style of ministers, proverbs and sayings, folktales, signifying, marking, and sounding. Each of these involves figurative language in one form or another and is employed in varying degrees by children, adolescents, and adults from both urban and rural environments. Examples will be drawn from works by Labov (1972), Mitchell-Kernan (1972), Smitherman (1977), and from personal observations of the authors.

Idioms

Idioms are a universal pattern of discourse, universal in that they are found not ony in all dialects of English, but in other languages. Black English has some interesting idioms of its own--idioms that sometimes have quite different meanings than they do in Standard English. For example, imagine a situation where a woman named Ann has come over to visit her friend Mary, just as Mary finishes preparing a new recipe. Ann tastes it and says, "Girl, you really put your foot in that!" Contrary to the negative mainstream interpretation of "putting one's foot in" something, this idiom is a compliment. What Ann is saying is that Mary went beyond the recipe and added her own special seasonings and spices. Idiomatic expressions are themselves the spices of conversation, which if lacking, would result in bland communication.

Rhetorical Style of Black Ministers

Much has been written about the duality of meaning found in the black man's religion. Songs, prayers, and preaching all display a multiplicity

of meanings and messages which may not be apparent to those outside of the community. The rhetorical style of black preachers has received attention, not only in the dramatic arts, but in numerous studies devoted to black folklore. Black ministers have often been portrayed as lively and inventive in their oratorical style (Smitherman, 1977; Mitchell, 1970). One noteworthy pattern is for the minister to draw a parallel between a scriptural source and a current world situation. According to Mitchell (1970), the Bible "provides the basis for unlimited creativity in the telling of rich and interesting stories, and these narrations command rapt attention; while the eternal truth is brought to bear on the Black experience and the struggle for liberation" (p. 113). Consider the following excerpt from a sermon entitled "From Disgrace to Dignity":

> Now listen to this verse: "He was sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed and in his right mind and they were afraid."
> This is an indication that while the man was torn apart,
> while he was naked and without integrity,
> while he was not together,
> while he was without his clothes,
> when he didn't know Jesus and didn't know himself,
> nobody was concerned about him.
> But when they found him dressed up,
> when they found him hanging around Jesus,
> when they found him together, they were afraid.
>
> I see a black and white man parallel here!
> As long as we were strugglin' in the cotton fields of
> Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi,
> with cottonsacks across our shoulders and to our side,
> pickin' cotton and havin' our fingers burnin' with
> stingin' cotton worms
>
> that could hide under the cotton leaves,
> as long as we were barefoot,
> actually and symbolically, . . .
> America was satisfied.
> But when the American looked up an' saw us standing
> before the supreme court,

> interpreting the constitution much better than those
> who wrote it--
> things began to get upset.
> One day
> America saw us marching to the voting booth,
> sitting down at lunch counters,
> and all of America became afraid . . .
> "And they found the man out of whom the devils were
> departed, sitting
> at the feet of Jesus,
> clothed and in his right mind,
> and they were afraid." (Tatum, Note 1)

In this example, the minister forewarns the audience that an analogy is about to be drawn. But even with this warning, the audience expresses surprise, agreement, and amusement at exactly how it is drawn. The minister goes on to say that because of revolutionary change in Africa, "England and the Western civilization had a nervous breakdown." This metaphor had an explosive impact on the audience-participators. But the minister did not slow down; comprehension was assumed to be immediate and automatic. An effective black minister does not rely on individual capacity to make the Bible relevant to life. Instead the minister directs the congregation's attention to the parallels he feels would be the most enlightening.

Proverbs and Sayings

Another type of figurative language found in the black community is in proverbs. Black children grow up with a great deal of motherwit, otherwise known as common sense, imparted to them through proverbial sayings (Brewer, 1973). For example, black children soon learn that the expression "A hard head makes for a soft behind" often literally means that "if you continue to disobey me, I will spank your rear end." A more global, proverbial

interpretation is also sometimes made, namely "those who insist upon being stubborn and refusing to listen often end up paying a stiff price" (Smitherman, 1977). Not all sayings are proverbial; some are downright insulting. An intruding neighbor is apt to hear "Why don't you let the door hit you where the good Lord split you!" Or someone professing to be financially well off may be told that, "He ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of!" For some people such sayings may conjure up distasteful images, but these images are realistic portrayals of life explicitly drawn for the listener by the vivid use of language.

Black Folklore

Black folklore, another fountain of figurative language, is replete with allegorical tales (Johnson, 1973; Spalding, 1972). Most people are familiar with the Bro' Rabbit Tales. Usually these trickster tales feature a supposedly weak, puny character, the rabbit, being caught in a bad situation by a larger animal, the fox or the bear, but being sly enough to get out of it. The general moral is: "Brute and brawn is seldom enough to keep you from being overpowered. Try a little brain-power. Think fast and live by your wits." Since the 60's, although Bro' Rabbit tales are not often heard, there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of animal characters to teach lessons.

It has often been said that in the days of slavery parents were letting their children know that even if it seemed that Ol' Massa had the upper hand, there were still ways to get the best of the situation and to come out on top. For example, the story was told of how one slave owner used to mistreat his slaves and not feed them properly:

> One day, just before hog killing time, the master went down to the pen and quite a few of the biggest hogs were laying out dead. He became quite upset and asked the hog-tender what had happened. The slave responded, "Well Massa, t'was a terrible thing. They came down with malitis."
>
> "Malitis!" said the master. "Well git those hogs out of da pen and give em to da nigras!" and the master rushed away so he wouldn't become contaminated. After the master had left, one of the children piped up and said, "Well what is malitis?" The slave answered, "When I hit those hogs inda middle of their heads with a mallet, they dropped dead away from ma-li-tis."

Many stories of a similar nature were recounted to instill lessons in subtlety, persuasion, and other techniques which would facilitate self-preservation.

Signifying

Another black rhetorical device is signifying. In standard English the term "signify" can either refer to an explicitly stated relationship between a meaning and an act ("yes" can be signified by, for example, raising the hand), or to an implicit relationship which stems from conventional associations (tattered clothes can signify poverty). In black communities signifying is more like the latter in that the relationship is often implicit, although the association is seldom conventional. The term is used to refer either to a tactic employed in verbal dueling or to indirect ways of encoding messages or meanings in natural conversations (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972). Signifying is used to imply, goad, beg, or boast by indirect verbal or gestural means. It can be done to stir up trouble for the sake of amusement or vindictive reasons, or it can be done to simply transmit a message (often negative) without being direct or blunt.

Black speakers make special use of indirection and innuendo with this verbal manipulation. A double entendre is often implied, but the responsibility for interpreting the message lies with the addressee, often together with an audience of other listeners. Signifying allows the speaker to maintain control of the interchange by reserving the right to insist on a harmless interpretation if the addressee shows signs of challenging the speaker.

Signifying may spring up in any natural, free-flowing conversation, with signaling cues which are often subtle and/or ambiguous. Inflection of the voice, eye gaze, cutting of the eyes, and facial expression, are some of the paralinguistic hints that influence interpretation. Although signifying can be used as a diplomatic way to communicate a fault, this is not necessarily the case. Sometimes it is amusing or treated as a joke. Mitchell-Kernan reports the following example:

> Grace: After I had my little boy, I swore I was not having any more babies. I thought four kids was a nice-sized family. But it didn't turn out that way. I was a little bit disgusted and didn't tell anybody when I discovered I was pregnant. My sister came over one day and I had started to show by that time.
>
> Rochelle: Girl, you sure do need to join the Metrecal for lunch bunch.
>
> Grace: (non-committally) Yea, I guess I am putting on a little weight.
>
> Rochelle: Now look here, girl, we both standing here soaking wet and you still trying to tell me it ain't raining (p. 323).

Rochelle was letting Grace know that she knew Grace was pregnant and that there was no need to act as though she was not. In this example, an entire sentence, "We both standing here getting soaking wet and you still trying to tell me it ain't raining," requires a metaphorical interpretation.

Marking

Marking is a narrative device commonly used in black communities in the telling of folktales or in the description of a scene witnessed by the speaker. In addition to reproducing the actual words of the original speaker, the narrator may adopt the voice, the speaking peculiarities, and the behavioral mannerisms of the speaker often inserting new content to gain specific expressive value. The replayed scene may be more of a parody than an imitation, but by portraying every observed nuance and idiosyncrasy, while overplaying notable features of the speaker, the narrator provides for the audience the full impact of what the narrator has perceived. Mitchell-Kernan (1972) uses the following example to illustrate these points.

> The individuals here, with the exception of S1, had recently attended the convention of a large corporation and had been part of a group which had been meeting prior to the convention to develop some strategy for putting pressure on the corporation to hire more blacks in executive positions. They had planned to bring the matter up at a general meeting of delegates, but before they had an opportunity to do so, a black company man spoke before the entire body. S2 said, "After
>
> he spoke our whole strategy was undermined, there was no way to get around his impact on the whites."

S1: What did he say?

S2: (drawling) He said, "Ah'm so-o-o happy to be here today. First of all, ah want to thank all you good white folks for creatin so many opportunities for us niggers and ya'll can be sho that as soon as we can git ourselves qualified we gon be filin our applications. Ya'll done done what we been waiting for a long time. Ya'll done give a colored man a good job with the company."

S1: Did he really say that?

S2: Um hm, yes he said it. Girl, where have you been? (Put down by intimating S1 was being literal.)

S1: Yeah, I understand, but what did he really say?

S3: He said, "This is a moment of great personal pride for me. My very presence here is a tribute to the civil rights movement. We now have ample evidence of the good faith of the company and we must now begin to prepare ourselves to handle more responsible positions. This is a major step forward on the part of the company. The next step is up to us." In other words, he said just what S2 said he said. He sold us out by accepting that kind of tokenism. (pp. 334-335)

In this example, the entire passage spoken by Speaker 2 requires a figurative interpretation. The narrator is implicitly identifying the speaker at the convention with a stereotypic portrayal of an "Uncle Tom" and he expects the audience to understand the full import of his message. In fact, a member of the audience is mildly ridiculed for even asking if that was in fact what occurred.

Sounding

A most interesting kind of nonliteral language use prevalent in Black communication is sounding; in some localities it may be called playing the

dozens, or sometimes cracking or ranking. In fact, especially among children, the word used to designate this activity changes from region to region, and from one year to another. For example, in Harlem, it is currently referred to as snappin' whereas in Central Illinois the term is smashin'. These terms are all labels for what Labov calls ritual insult.

Dollard (1939) defines sounding (he uses the term "dozens") as "a pattern of interactive insult guided by well recognized rules which at once permit and govern the emotional expression. It is for some a game, the only purpose of which seems to be the amusement of participants and onlookers. In other circumstances the play aspect disappears and the dozens leads directly to fighting" (p. 4). Engaged in by males, females, young and old, sounding is most common amongst adolescent and preadolescent black males. The immediate purpose of sounding is to put down one's adversary, in the presence of an audience of peers, by means of insults which tend to involve close relatives (especially the mother) and which make derogatory allusions, typically to physical attributes or sexual conduct of that relative. Dexterity in this verbal skill is one way to achieve status in the male peer group. Sounds often involve taboo subjects and obscenities. The appropriate response to a sound is another, ideally more clever, semantically or syntactically related sound. The measure of success is the evaluative response of the audience.

Labov (1972), in his well-known paper, based on observations of an inner-city community, analyzes sounding from the perspective of a sociolinguist concerned with discourse analysis. Sounding, he argues, is a form of ritualized insult. There is a delicate boundary between it and

genuine insult, a boundary that occasionally is crossed either through ineptness or ignorance, and a boundary whose transgression can lead to anger or violence. One of the distinguishing features of sounding is that the protagonist says something that is patently untrue. The potential danger lies in the fact that the speaker has to have an appropriate knowledge of the adversary's background if he or she is to be sure that the allegation is indeed untrue. The falsity of the assertion is sometimes guaranteed by its absurdity. On other occasions, however, the claim could be true. For example, compare "I went in Junior house 'n' sat in a chair that caved in," with "When I walked across your house, a rat gave me a jaywalkin' ticket." Both of these allude to domestic poverty and squalor. However, the first describes a situation which is a possible one. Since sounding always and necessarily involves an audience, the speaker would have to presuppose that the audience knew that it was factually false--but no such presupposition was warranted in the utterance about a chair caving in. The rules for sounding were broken and the response, rather than another (hopefully) "superior" sound, could be a literal denial: "You's a damn liar . . ." It is situations of this kind, where the playful, if often cruel, nature of sounding is replaced with "badmouthing," that have the potential for hard feelings or violence. Both ritual and personal insults are means of putting people down, but the former are socially acceptable means while the latter are not.

Educational Significance

The study of metaphor has special significance for education. As noted by Ortony, Reynolds, and Arter (1978) "since so much of what people

learn is learned through the medium of language and since metaphors are so prevalent in language, it follows that knowing how metaphors are processed and what constraints exist on their comprehension is bound to contribute to our understanding of the learning process" (p. 937). In the context of schools, metaphor is used in a variety of situations: summarizing, clarification, model-formation, and the introduction of new information. Another area which holds potential significance for education is the possibility of using metaphor as a motivational device. This would be especially true for those students who find the use of figurative language not only challenging but fun. One such group for which enhanced motivation may be especially profitable is black students.

Black Language is a multi-faceted system whose components reveal a lot about the culture and people to whom it belongs. Black verbal art forms such as idioms, preacher style, proverbs and sayings, folktales, signifying, marking, and sounding have intricate rule systems which illustrate the importance of content, function and context in language use. Black children as young as 8 or 9 years of age inevitably listen to and frequently engage in some of these language activities. To do so requires understanding sociolinguistic conventions that govern sounding. A high degree of complexity is involved in both production and comprehension, and much of this complexity derives from the reliance on metaphor and metaphorlike relations. For example, sounding, which seems to appear developmentally before the other forms, is based upon metaphorical comparisons. Labov (1972) proposes that the basic underlying structure of a sound is, T(B) is so X that P, where T(B) is the target of the sound

(e.g., your mother), X is the attribute that is focused on (e.g., old), and P is the consequent proposition (e.g., she got cobwebs under her arms). As noted in Taylor and Ortony (1980), "the form is that of an assertion to the effect that the target has some property to some degree. The degree to which it has it is implied in terms of some bizarre consequence that would follow from possessing the property to that extent. The consequence is literally untrue in just the same way that in a simile (e.g., John is like a telephone pole), or its corresponding metaphor, the referent, John, is not believed by the speaker or hearer to be literally a telephone pole, and for that reason is not believed to be literally as thin as one. In other words, in a simile or metaphor, John is alleged to be like, or as thin as, a telephone pole only metaphorically speaking. The two things being compared are not claimed to be really alike at all (Ortony, 1979). Thus, if we recognize that similes are essentially metaphorical in nature, we discover that the use of metaphorical devices is rampant in the language of both black adults and children, and that it is already widespread by the time children reach fourth grade.

That many black children have the skills required to produce and comprehend nonliteral verbal forms may have interesting educational implications. Black students are exposed to and participate in verbal activities which involve figurative expressions. If teachers could find a way to capitalize upon these verbal skils, they might find a goldmine for enhancing academic achievement.

A Causal Model of Figurative Language Comprehension

In the preceding section we made the case that a number of Black language uses involve metaphorical comparisons and, therefore, that this ought to help black students understand figurative language in school. Henceforth, we will concentrate on just one Black language activity, sounding. The reason for this focus is that it is very prevalent among black middle school and high school youngsters. If there is any one black language activity that ought to promote figurative language comprehension in school sounding is it. It would be naive, however, to suppose that skill in sounding is the only factor involved in black youngsters' understanding of metaphor. Figure 1 diagrams a causal model for black children that includes not only sounding skill but also two other factors, general language ability and black language ability. The arrows mark causal paths. An arrow indicates that the first factor is hypothesized to be the cause or part of the cause of the second factor.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Operationally, in the present research general language ability was defined as vocabulary knowledge. It has been known at least since Lewis Terman standardized the Stanford-Binet in 1918 that vocabulary knowledge is an excellent indicator of verbal ability. Indeed, Terman concluded that the correlation of the vocabulary subscale with the whole test was so high that the subscale could be used by itself as a measure of general intelligence. Black language ability was also defined in terms of

vocabulary knowledge, only in this case the measure was specific to Black English.

Following Anderson and Freebody (1981, p. 81) we assume that a person who scores high on a vocabulary test has "deeper and broader knowledge of the culture" than a person who scores low. In the case of the test assessing general language ability, "the culture" is mainstream culture. School texts are written in Standard English and usually presuppose mainstream culture, therefore, the model contains a direct path from general language abiity to figurative language. Black language ability and general language ability are assumed in the model to be interrelated because Black English and black culture overlap with Standard English and mainstream culture.

For the black child, the model assumes that sounding skill is linked to figurative language comprehension. The path is indicated as bidirectional because, although we believe that preponderant direction of causation is from sounding to figurative language, activities in school involving figurative language could feed back the other way. In the model, Black language ability and general language ability are both hypothesized to have direct effects on figurative language comprehension, as well as indirect effects mediated through sounding skill.

The model is offered as a preliminary theory subject to refinement. For instance, we regard the link between general language ability and sounding skill as problematic. It was included in order to warrant a thorough exploration of all plausible relationships.

The model in Figure 1 was tested with both black and white children. However, it was expected to fit only the black children. General language ability was expected to be the sole determinant of figurative language comprehension among white children. It is important to note that the model does not provide a basis for a belief that the black children will have an overall superiority at figurative language comprehension in school settings. The white child might have an advantage in general language ability that could outweigh any advantage the black child might gain from experience with sounding.

Method

Black and white subjects were given a series of tasks which sought to determine general verbal ability, figurative language comprehension, skill in sounding, and general skill in black language. Multiple regression analyses were done with the major dependent variable of interest being figurative language comprehension.

Subjects

The subjects were 157 seventh grade students from two distinct subpopulations. Black subjects were drawn from two schools: 85 were from a school in a working class area of a large Tennessee city; 17 were from a school in a working class area of a mid-sized Illinois city. The 50 white subjects were drawn from a school in a working class area of a mid-sized Illinois city. There were 103 black students (54 males, 49 females) and 50 white students (25 males, 25 females). Four students were dropped from

analysis because their data suggested that they did not attend seriously to the task.

Materials and Tasks

There were two test booklets, one for each of the two 45 minute test sessions in which all subjects participated.

There were several measures of general verbal ability. One was the auditory vocabulary sub-test of the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (Karlsen, Madden, & Gardner, 1975). For each item, the administrator reads a key word and three possible meanings. Students mark the number of the correct meaning.

The Anderson-Freebody type vocabulary test (1983) was used to probe knowledge of words specific to the domain of items later used in the test of non-literal comparison statements. In this test, a student indicates whether or not she knows the meaning of a word by checking yes or no after the word. Guessing is controlled by correcting for "false alarms" on a number of pseudowords included in the set.

After the reading two school-like prose passages containing several figurative expressions, students were asked two kinds of questions: those requiring comprehension of text segments containing figurative expressions and those requiring comprehension of literal statements. The combined score for the two sets of literal items served as another measure of general verbal ability.

The final measure of verbal ability consisted of a test of Standard English double function terms. Items from this subtest were intermixed with items measuring knowledge of words that have double functions only in

Black English. Each double function word was embedded in two contextual frames: one designed to elicit a literal interpretation (literal frame) and the other designed to elicit a figurative interpretation (figurative frame). Subjects were told to select the meaning of the target word from four possible choices. For example, one of the target words was bright. The literal frame was:

> Dad went over and closed the curtains on the kitchen window. He said, "Sun, you certainly are bright!"

The figurative frame was:

> Dad looked at Junior's report card and said, "Son, you certainly are bright!"

For this example the multiple choice alternatives were the same:

a) lots of fun

b) giving off a lot of light

c) quick-witted, smart

d) irritating

A subscore measure of general verbal ability was derived by summing the number of correct interpretations for the Standard English double function words in both the literal and figurative frames.

Figurative language comprehension was determined using two measures. First, subjects were asked to explain in their own words a list of non-literal comparison statements (expressed in isolated sentences) typical of standard English. The list included idioms, novel metaphors and similes.

For example:

idiom	You're going to eat those words.
metaphor	Reality is a sledgehammer.
simile	Insults are like razors.

The second measure of figurative language ability consisted of the multiple choice test items following the prose passages that tapped text segments containing figurative expressions.

Sounding skill was assessed with five measures developed by the first author. For the first measure, subjects were rated by their fellow classmates, using a 5-point rating scale. Black subjects were told to rate each other on their ability to "cap" on each other (cappin' was the local term for sounding). Since it was assumed that white subjects would be unfamiliar with sounding they were told to rate each other on their ability to insult other people. Subjects circled one of five options, with options (1), (3), and (5) labeled respectively, "very good," "sort of good," and "not very good." Each subject's mean rating by peers provided one measure of sounding skill. Four additional measures of sounding were obtained from paper and pencil tests: two comprehension measures, a recognition measure, and an open-ended measure.

The first comprehension measure consisted of questions that required the subject to fill in missing words in sounds. The missing word was the attribute on which the sound was focused. For example, in the item Your momma so ____ she can play hide and seek under a penny! the attribute of focus is thinness, so an appropriate response would have been "thin," "small," or "skinny." The second comprehension measure consisted of

questions that required the subject to translate or explain the meaning of a sound. For example, subjects were asked to explain the meaning of the following sound:

The roaches in your house walk single file.

The recognition measure required the subject to rank-order four possible responses (comebacks) to a prompt sound. The subject's score was based on how well he/she matched the rankings given by judges experienced in sounding (see Note 3). For example, if the prompt sound was:

You so ugly that when you were born the doctor slapped your face!

four possible responses would be:

a. You so ugly everybody laughs at you!

b. You so ugly you don't need to wear a mask at Halloween!

c. You so ugly that when you were born the doctor slapped your momma!

d. All the trees dry up when you walk by because you are so ugly!

In this case the preferred rankings were: 1-c, 2-b, 3-d, and 4-a (for further explication see scoring procedure).

The final measure of sounding skill was based on the open-ended questions. Subjects were given prompt sounds and asked to provide a response in the form of a "comeback" one might use if someone used the first sound or insult on him or her during a conversation. One example of a prompt sound was:

Your lips so big if you ever fell in the sea you could use them for flippers!

One subject's response was:

> Your lips so big they are the world's largest rubber bands!

To summarize, then, there were five separate indices of sounding available: peer rating, two measures of comprehension of sounds, recognition of sounds, and creation of "comeback" sounds. The measures were used separately and in composites.

General skill in Black language was assessed with one measure. As noted earlier, subjects were given a series of sentences with double function words from Standard English and Black English. Black language ability was defined as the total score on the subset of items that serve double functions only in Black English. For example:

> The puppy chewed up newspapers in the living room.
> It was bad.

The multiple choice alternatives were: a. cute; b. a gift; c. spotted; d. disobedient. The figurative frame was:

> Dick wore his new suit to his girlfriend's house.
> It was bad.

The multiple choice alternatives were: a. looking good; b. a gift; c. spotted; d. disobedient.

Procedures

Testing Procedure

There were two test sessions. In both sessions, subjects participated in their classrooms in groups ranging in size from 20 to 35. Each group received two experimental booklets. The first booklet included a cover sheet, reading instructions, two prose passages, two vocabulary

tests, two sets of multiple choice questions, a filler task, and the sentences containing both Black English and Standard English double function words. The students were told to fill out the cover sheet and then read the instructions carefully as the experimenter read aloud. The instructions told the children that they would be given a short story to read at their own pace. Students were cautioned to read carefully because they would "be asked questions about the story later." The students then read the story. After the story was read the students were given the aural vocabulary test from the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test as an interpolated task. Next, the students were presented with a set of multiple choice questions based on the story they read. Following the multiple choice questions for Story 1, Booklet 1 contained reading instructions, Story 2, the Anderson-Freebody vocabulary test, and multiple choice questions for Story 2.

Next the instructions for the sentences with double function words were given. The instructions directed the students to "circle the choice that best fits the meaning of the underlined word or words in the sentence." An example was explained and students were cautioned not to turn back once they had completed an item. Students who finished quickly were given a filler task to do.

The second booklet, used in the second session, included a cover sheet, comprehension test instructions, a series of comparison statements, the "insult contest" (i.e., sounding test) instructions, the "insult contest" test items, and the "insult skill" ratings. The students were told to fill out the cover sheet and then to read the instructions

carefully as the experimenter read aloud. The instructions told the children that on the following pages they would find a list of expressions. Their job was to explain the expressions to the best of their ability. They were told that some of the expressions may not make sense but they should do the best they could. After an example was explained, students were allowed to work at their own pace.

The "insult contest" was divided into four sections, each section preceded by instructions. Section 1 contained the comprehension questions which sought the attribute upon which the insult was focused. The instructions for section 1 asked the student to imagine that a visitor from another world had come to Earth and that the student was their guide. "While walking down the street, the visitor is listening to bits of conversation. At one point he overhears people insulting each other but he only hears parts of the sentences and is not sure what is meant." On the following page was a list of sentences with one or two words missing. The student's task was to fill in the word that they felt best fitted the meaning of the sentence. The students were told to look at the experimenter when they had completed this task.

The second section contained the comprehension questions which required subjects to explain insults. Preceding the second section the students read:

> The visitor is still in town but even though now he is able to hear the entire sentence, he is not always able to understand them. On the following pages will be a list of sentences. Under the sentence please write what you think the sentence means.

The students were again told to look at the experimenter once they had completed this task.

The third section contained the open-ended questions which required subjects to respond to a prompt sound. The instructions for the third section asked the student to imagine himself in a situation where insults were being exchanged back and forth. "If the first person says something insulting to you, what would a good response be (keep in mind that you want to get the best of your opponent)? Write down the first thing that comes to your mind." An example was provided and reviewed, then the students were allowed to work at their own pace.

The fourth section contained the recognition questions that required subjects to rank-order four possible responses to a prompt sound. The instructions for the fourth section asked the students to imagine that they were still in a situation where insults were being exchanged back and forth. The first person says something insulting and then the second person says something back. In this part of the booklet, the first person's insulting remark was presented. Below this remark were 4 possible responses for the second person. The student's task was to rate how good these responses were. They were told to write a number 1 beside the response that they thought was the very best response, a 2 beside the next best response, a 3 beside their third choice and a 4 beside the response they thought was the worst of the four. After an example was reviewed, the students were cautioned to remember that there were no right or wrong answers and that we were simply interested in their opinions. The students

then worked at their own pace. Those who finished early worked on a filler task.

In the final task in the second session, students were given a class list with a 5-point rating scale next to the name of each member of their class. They were asked to rate fellow students on how well they insult each other.

Scoring Procedure

Details of the scoring procedures can be found in Taylor (1982). Several of the measures required judgment in scoring. In these cases, interrater reliability coefficients were determined based on the scores awarded by two judges to 10% of the protocols. The following percentage agreement was obtained: figurative language--86%; fill-in-the-blank sound questions--98%; explain sound questions--87%; creation of "comeback" sounds--80%.

Results

Recursive regression analyses were completed to evaluate the causal model presented in Figure 1 relating general language ability, black language ability, sounding skill, and figurative language comprehension. Beforehand, however, it was necessary to reduce the measures to a set of stable factors. This was done on several grounds using a couple of different techniques, including factor analysis.

Factor analysis was done on the cluster of general language ability variables using a principal component analysis and a varimax rotation. Analyses were done across and within race. The across-race analysis

yielded one factor, with the heaviest loading on the Stanford vocabulary test. The within-race analyses yielded comparable results. Therefore, the score on the Stanford Test was used as the measure of general verbal ability.

The results for the factor analyses done on the cluster of black language variables was not as clearcut. Each analysis yielded two or three factors. Because of fluctuation in the factor structure it was decided that the variables would be treated independently.

Several measures were refined on the basis of further preliminary analyses. The recognition measure of sounding was discarded because whites performed better on the measure than blacks and because it had a reliability of less than .50. The peer ratings of sounding skill among blacks had negative correlations with the other measures of sounding and with figurative language comprehension; therefore, it was not considered further. The measure of sounding skill used in the path analyses was a composite of scores on the remaining three sounding tests. The out-of-context figurative language measure was dropped when initial analyses showed that it was almost entirely predicted by general verbal abiity. In the path analyses the criterion was in-context use of figurative language. Most of a child's exposure to figurative language occurs within a contextual frame and, thus, it can be argued that this is a more ecologically valid measure, anyway.

Table 1 shows the means, reliabilities, standard deviations, by race for each variable included in the path analyses. Two things are evident from this table. First, the reliabilities for black language and sounding

are greater for blacks than for whites. Secondly, the pattern of differences in standard deviations on these two measures mirrors the pattern for the reliabilities. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the lower reliabilities for whites are at least partially due to a restriction in range. Table 2 contains the intercorrelations among the measures for blacks and for whites.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here.

The structural equations for the model presented in Figure 1, written in standardized form, are as follows:

$$z1 = p31z3 + e1$$

$$z2 = p12z1 + p32z3 + p42z4 + e2$$

$$z4 = p14z1 + p24z2 + p34z3 + e4$$

where, for example, p12 represents the effect of variable 1 on variable 2. In these equations, z1 = the black language ability as measured by the Black English double function term test; z2 = skill in sounding as represented by the sounding composite; z3 = general language ability as represented by the Stanford vocabulary test; z4 = figurative language comprehension as measured by the interpretation of figurative segments in passages, and e1, for instance, stands for the error of measurement for black langauge ability.

Table 3 presents the path coefficients. Summarizing the results in plain English, we found that for black subjects general language ability is significantly related to figurative language comprehension, but it does not directly affect sounding skill. Sounding skill is significantly affected

by black language facility and sounding skill, in turn, significantly influences figurative language comprehension. Whether or not black language ability directly affects figurative language comprehension is indeterminate, since there was a moderately large but nonsignificant path coefficient. The link between general language ability and sounding skill could be eliminated. Otherwise, it is apparent that the model gives a good account of the performance of black subjects.

Insert Table 3 about here.

From Table 3, it is equally clear that the model gives a poor account of the performance of white subjects. For them, figurative language comprehension is determined by general language ability and nothing else.

In our judgment, the best picture of the pattern of relationships is provided when the correlations are corrected for attenuation due to unreliability. The Stanford test is a standardized measure that has benefited from a history of development and tryout in which a number of items writers and psychometricians have participated. The measures of black language and sounding skill were prepared by the first author and they were not tried out prior to this study. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are less reliable than the Stanford test. The fact that they are less reliable means that the uncorrected path coefficients do not give a proper estimate of the magnitude of the contribution that black language facility and sounding skill make to figurative language comprehension. The analysis done with correlation coefficients corrected for attenuation, shown in Table 3, gives estimates of the theoretical limit

that would be achieved with perfect measurement. The point suggested by this analysis is that, among blacks, black language ability and sounding skill are stronger determinants of figurative language comprehension than general language ability. Among whites, the analysis makes clear that general language ability is the sole determinant.

Discussion

Evidence obtained from this study indicates that, for white subjects, the understanding of figurative language is accounted for by general verbal ability. This was found to be true regardless of whether the figurative language appeared in a school-like text or in a test of sounding skill.

For black subjects, the evidence indicated that understanding of figurative language is explained by a combination of skill in general verbal ability, sounding, and black language. The relationship between general verbal ability and figurative language comprehension and between sounding skill and figurative language comprehension are direct, whereas the relationship between black language ability and figurative language comprehension is indirect. In other words, black language ability affects sounding skill which in turn affects figurative language comprehension.

These results suggest that for black subjects the set of skills that facilitate academic figurative language interpretation include, not only general verbal ability, but also skill in using a specific black language pattern, namely sounding. This implies that there are skills peculiar to sounding which enhance a person's ability to comprehend figurative language. A plausible explanation is that several black language patterns,

most notably sounding, rely heavily on nonliteralness and innovative word connotations.

There is a caveat that must be expressed. The present study was exploratory and, therefore, a certain amount of trial and error was essential in order to refine the measures. In initial analyses the measures of sounding did not discriminate sharply between whites and blacks, nor did they predict figurative language comprehension as strongly as expected. Further analyses, albeit post hoc, revealed a clear and meaningful pattern of difference between whites and blacks. However, replication will be required before this pattern of difference can be accepted with confidence.

Whether the black child's special facility with non-literalness will be seen and appreciated by educators is problematical at the present time. There is considerable evidence that Black English is stigmatized in the school. For instance, Rist (1970) did a longitudinal study on teacher expectations, with special attention given to the hypothesis of a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure in ghetto education. The premise of his paper was that the kindergarten teachers develop expectations about the academic potential of children based on superficial attributes. Notably, the use of Black English led to negative evaluations.

Therefore, it appears that teachers need to appreciate differences in communication strategies in order to foster an environment in the classroom which capitalizes upon the strengths of all the children. Since this study suggests that skills acquired "in the streets," so to speak, do transfer to school settings, teachers need to develop a respect for, rather than a bias

against, the use of such language. Of course, one could make such an argument on purely ethical grounds; however, it is comforting to know that the argument is supported by empirical investigation.

In conclusion, this research attempted to answer the question of whether interpretive skills employed in black language could be generalized to school-like tasks. This was an exploratory study, so, at the most, only tentative conclusions can be drawn. Nonetheless, there was support for the hypothesis that facility in a specific black language pattern enhanced figurative language comprehension. Future research should focus on determining the nature of the underlying skills involved in black language patterns and precise ways teachers can capitalize upon these skills in classroom settings.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Reliabilities

	Race					
	Blacks			Whites		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability
General Language Ability	22.75	6.80	.90	29.96	6.29	.90
Black Language Ability	6.75	1.83	.59	6.08	1.55	.36
Sounding Skill	46.84	9.08	.67	51.08	5.80	.50
Figurative Language Comprehension	7.05	1.92	.57	8.12	1.39	.34

Table 2

Correlations Among Measures

Measure	1	2	3	4
1 General Language Ability	---	.41	.31	.38
2 Black Language Ability	.13	---	.36	.35
3 Sounding Skill	.46	.20	---	.36
4 Figurative Language Comprehension	.61	.06	.24	---

Note. Correlations for blacks are above the diagonal; correlations for whites, below the diagonal.

Table 3

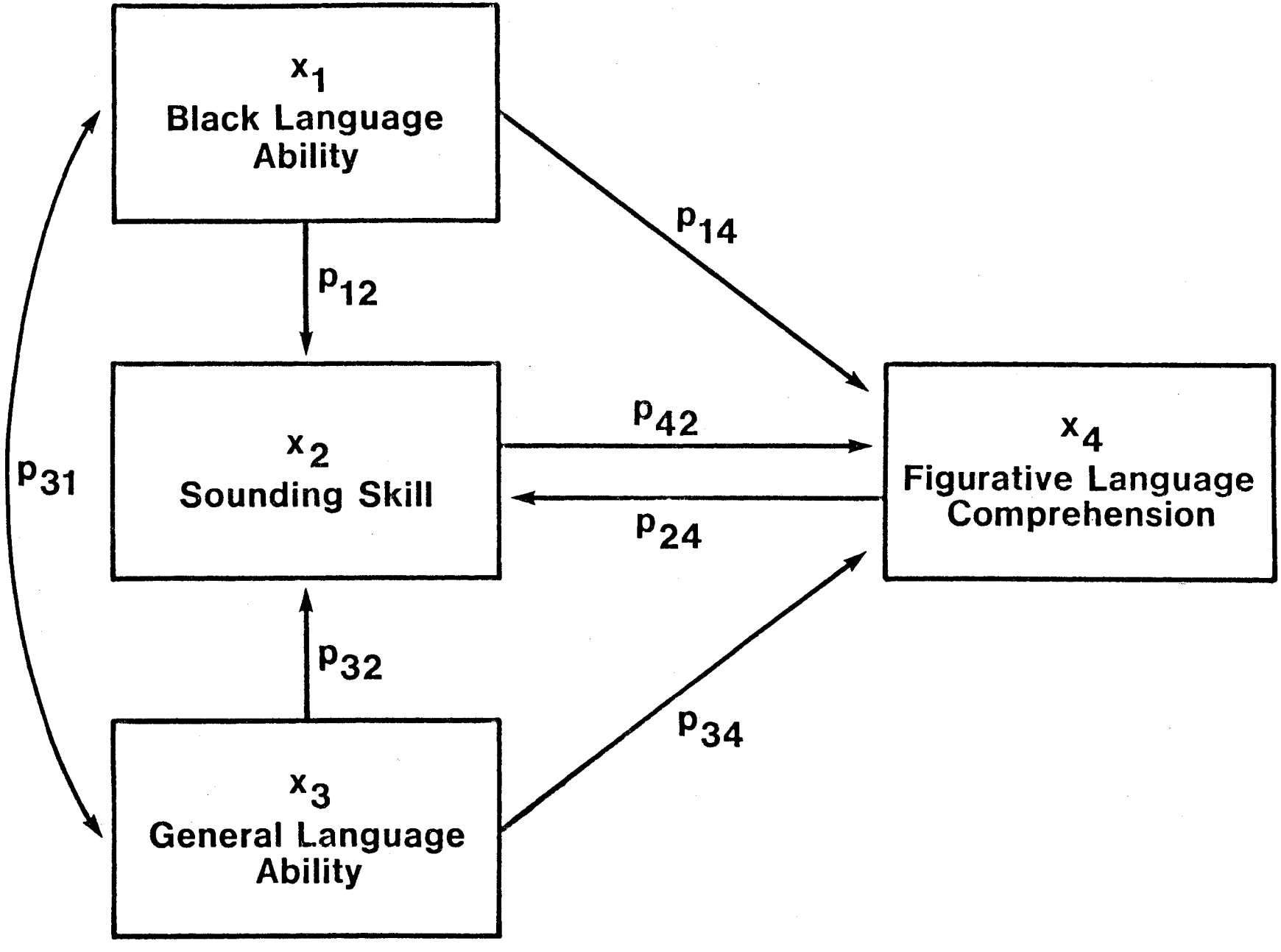
Path Coefficients

Path	Blacks			Whites		
	Uncorrected Coefficients	Corrected Coefficients	Standard Error	Uncorrected Coefficients	Corrected Coefficients	Standard Error
12	.23*	.36	.10	.14	.32	.13
14	.17	.27	.10	-.01	.00	.12
24	.23*	.33	.09	-.05	.00	.13
31	.41*	.57	.07	.13	.23	.16
32	.12	.00	.10	.49*	.62	.16
34	.24*	.24	.10	.61*	1.00	.13
42	.24*	.37	.10	-.06	.00	.16

*$p < .05$

Figure Caption

Figure 1. A causal model of the relationships among general language ability, black language ability, sounding skill, and figurative language comprehension.


x_1
Black Language Ability
x_2
Sounding Skill
x_3
General Language Ability
x_4
Figurative Language Comprehension
p_{12}
p_{14}
p_{31}
p_{42}
p_{24}
p_{32}
p_{34}

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